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Alfred

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Don't be angry because you have not made the whole journey. For the journey is nought but a series of steps. As long as one foot follows the other, no matter how slowly, the journey is underway. There is no shame in traveling slowly, for those who move too quickly oft miss the true pleasures of the voyage. Travel, then, quickly enough to be content with your own progress. There is no call for anything more, nor justification for anything less. He is the fool who strives to travel at the other man's pace; for if that were meant to be he would surely have been given the other man's feet. Move quickly enough to see, when looking back from time to time, that distance has indeed been covered. But do not move so swiftly that you arrive at the end of the road all out of breath, unable to recall the events you've encountered and those who've crossed your path along the way. For that is folly most regretted. And moreover, be wary not to move so quickly that you arrive at your journey's end alone, for it is surely a one way voyage. One is never granted the privilege of going back to pick up those who have been left behind in haste.

by Peter McCarthy

Short Story

Alfred

by Charles L. Lewis

"Alfred, hurry up. The expressman's here already. And you call yourself a shipping clerk? Well!"

"Right away, Mr. Colbert, right away," whispered Albert in a trembly voice. Alfred, already looking like a skinny bloodhound, dropped his eyes and ears even lower.

"Well? Well?," rumbled Mr. Colbert petulantly. "Oh, never mind."

Alfred turned back to his worktable. He brushed a few wisps of strawberry-colored hair from his watery, blue eyes and continued packing. He raised his eyes to the multitude of windows facing his window. His eyes eagerly picked out the one important window.

"There she is," breathed Alfred. He wrinkled his nose so that the thick lenses of his glasses came into better focus. His usually sallow skin took on a faint tinge of color; his slightly bent, thin frame straightened somewhat. All summer long, Alfred had watched this window from over seventy-five feet of air-well, and from a few meager details, he had conjured up the most beautiful woman he could imagine. He was never sure that she noticed him among the sea of windows in the air-well. Nevertheless, each day he noted the color of the dress she was wearing and he looked for her in the elevators, the bustling lobby, the shops in the arcade, and in the eating spots in the vicinity.

Mr. Colbert's voice, roaring now, and dangerously edged with exasperation, yanked the dreaming Alfred back across the air-well with jet-plane speed. The shipping clerk grabbed the stack of express packages, waybills and scurried down the merchandise-filled aisle to where the expressman waited in toe-tapping frustration.

"Whew!", sighed Alfred, back at his packing table, "now that that's over, I can pack in peace and look for — ah — there she is now." He noticed how she sat at her typewriter, so erect and correct. How she gracefully reached, from time to time, for the telephone; and how she seemed to smile when she talked to the unseen person on the other end.

The girl of Alfred's dreams today wore a skyblue dress with a white collar. Her blond hair seemed to be piled on the top of her head.

Alfred could often be found at second-rate movie houses during his off hours. If a particularly alluring movie queen was featured, he might see the picture over and over again and maybe a third time. He, short of frame with sparse hair and stooped posture, worshipped the movie queens of Hollywood. Alfred, in common with hundreds of other men of his kind, longed for facial features, clumsy in the social amenities, and innocent of self-assurance, dared to love those whom he thought to be above him. And so it

"Must be close to noon," muttered Alfred, halfheartedly closing the flaps of the box he was working on. He tore his eyes away from the blue dress and across the way, peered through the scratched, milky plastic crystal of his large wristwatch. He hurried to the little washroom and dashed a few drops of water on his hands to remove most of the foul-smelling packing glue. He stabbed his hair with a partly toothless comb which was caked with dirt and rancid body oils at the base of each tooth.

He usually ate at the Hamburger Haven, a burger and a malt for a \$1.50. No, he wouldn't go there today. He would go into the arcade of the building and eat at the Tex-Mex Chile Store lunch counter. He entered the brightly lighted arcade, turned in the door of the fast-food store and wormed his way to a stool at the crowded counter.

"Hamburger with everything 'n a malt, pelase," he said automatically. Sitting there, Alfred's mind was a complete blank. What finally got his attention was the loud popping and cracking of chewing gum by someone sitting next to him. He glanced, annoyed, into the mirrored wall back of the lunch counter, and promptly froze. The moisture crept onto his palms, his throat dried up, and he didn't quite know what to do with his hands. There beside him sat his vision in blue!

"'Would ya mind passi' the menyaa, bud?'" wheezed a nasal voice. He reached for the menu, then stopped, immobile. No! No! That voice couldn't be coming from her! A bony knee slammed against his leg. "Poddin' me, but if it ain't no trouble, could ya pass the menyaa?"

Alfred, repulsed and galvanized by her touch, continued the movement and handed her the menu. His hand shook. He noticed the blond hair which was dark brown at the roots. He noticed the greasy, penciled eyebrows arching highly over the stubble of the originals. With a start he noticed the powder-caked pores, the cute red lips painted on the much larger lips, and the dark eyelashes which were stuck together with black beads of mascara. He tried not to see the powder-and-dirt-soiled collar of the blue dress. The blue dress! The knit blue dress; some of the yarn had been snagged and the ends were beginning to disappear into the ever-widening holes.

"Gawd, ain't it hot for September?" whined the girl. She half-turned on her stool to adjust the baggy dress and Alfred was assailed with the odor of cheap perfume and old perspiration.

Heartsick, Alfred gripped the counter to steady his whirling head. His fingers and nails, now drained of blood, turned white in their effort to keep him on an even keel while his ideals and dreams crashed all around him.

The girl in blue, attracted by his slight reeling and the sudden, alarming lack of color in his now sagging face, watched with interest as the counter girl placed a sandwich and malt before him. His jaw muscles were visibly working. He made an effort to say something. Only a strangled gurgle was heard. "Pardon?" asked the counter girl as she was making out his check. Alfred tried again. "Sorry. Can't eat it," he rasped. He slapped some money on the counter and staggered from the store.

As he stumbled into the busy, bright arcade, a shrill, whine-ridden voice chased after him. "Gosh, what a jerk; a real screwball. Ain't it hot, honey?"